



William the Englishman's De urina non visa and its fortune

Laurence Moulinier

► To cite this version:

Laurence Moulinier. William the Englishman's De urina non visa and its fortune. Medical Prognosis in the Middle Age, May 2012, Londres, United Kingdom. halshs-00849385

HAL Id: halshs-00849385

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00849385>

Submitted on 30 Jul 2013

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

In the 20's of the 13th century, a branch of medical semiology to which a large part of this symposium is dedicated, was flourishing in the Medieval West. That is to say, uroscopy, an art of establishing a diagnosis and a prognosis by examining the patient's urine, which was actually born in Byzantium but highly developed in the West since two important works on that theme had been translated in Latin, the *Peri ouron* of Theophilus and the *Liber urinarum* of Isaac Israeli.

Once put in Latin in the 11th century, those two texts highly stimulated the medical reflection, especially in Salerno, where several famous masters paid a great attention to medical semiology, especially to the science of urine. The French physician Gilles de Corbeil received there a fundamental teaching, which allowed him then to compose a medical poem, the *Versus de urinis*, meant to become one of the basic readings of the scholars of the nascent faculties of medicine.

Uroscopy was of course not the only way of reading the body's symptoms ; but at that time, at the junction between the 12th and 13th centuries, it tended to become more and more important in the texts as in practice, and sometimes overwhelming, despite of two famous salernitan verses which invited the physicians to see everything in the urine, but not to believe that they could see everything in the urine.

And this is precisely the period in which an English physician named William and settled in Marseille, decided to take the opposite course, in a way, by composing a work with a tantalizing title, *De urina non visa*, that is to say, « On urine not seen ». We know that by that time, the medical consultation could take place *in absentia patientis*, the sick being represented by his urine's flask ; but William goes further and proposes a consultation *in absentia urine*.

In this short treatise consisting of nine chapters, William did not want to prove that uroscopy was not sufficient : he aimed to demonstrate that the examination of a patient's urine was not even necessary.

But he was certainly not a mere nihilist or an aggressor of medicine. Proud of being a doctor himself, he did not want to make a clean sweep of the practice of his time : he wanted to give astrology its whole dignity, to show its superiority on medicine, and to demonstrate that a proper *medicus* had to use the resources of this approach. The astrologer and the doctor have both to decipher signs, but only the second has to base himself on sensible, that is to say, corruptible signs, and this is the reason why his conjecture is necessarily of a lower level.

We must here remind of course of two things : astrology was another discipline considerably developed and revived since the end of the 11th century ; and Marseille was certainly a good place for its study. It is precisely the place where, some 80 years

before, Raymond, later known as of Marseille, rediscovered Al-Zarqâli's freshly translated works, and defended the new arabic astrology.

In the 1170's, another English man, Roger of Hereford, was attracted too by the city and its possibilities; he became another agent of transmission of the new arabic knowledge, and was notably the first in the Medieval West to give the physicians an access to the art of judicial prognosis. And Marseille attracted for similar reasons two other English men, our William and, a bit later, Robertus Anglicus.

We don't know if Marseille was for William the place of his youth and education or a town in which he lived continuously till he got the quality of « citizen ». But in any case, Marseille was an ideal place of transitus and circulation for men and for books.

Besides Ptolemy, the sources he quotes are astrologers or astronomers translated in latin in the 12th century for most of them, to begin with Alcabitus, whose *Liber introductorius* was meant to become the handbook of astrological teaching in the european universities at the end of our period. William also quotes Albumasar, the jewish astrologer Messahala, and Hermann of Carinthia. As far as it concerns uroscopy, instead, William quotes no one, and does not even mention fundamental concepts as the semiotics of colours or the hypostasis or contenta. His forerunner Raymond de Marseille cited Hippocrate and Galen, but William gives no medical sources and we can only suspect, by his use of the word infectio, that he knew something about Theophilus' *Peri ouron*.

I can't enter into the details of each of the nine chapters composing this short treatise. Let's underscore that in the 7th, William adapts to medical purposes, a technique which allowed the astrologer to find the « lord » of the object of his research. For the precision, it's the « lord of the urine », having a proper house, that he tries to define, and the concept of « place of the liver » plays a central part in his demonstration, since the urine was supposed to reflect processes in the liver. Inspired by the classical astrological concept of « pars », William innovates by creating a new notion, the concept of « pars epatis », « part of the liver » : according to him, the 5th astrological house will be the « place of the liver ».

After a quite theoretical demonstration in 8 chapters, the treatise ends with an exemplum refering to William's personal experience. At the end of the year 1219, he writes, a patient came to him, and after examining the asters, the *figura celi* corresponding to the moment of the consultation, the doctor declared that the patient was afflicted with hemoptysis and phthisis (consumption), and that he would die within two months and 8 days. This prognosis was confirmed, and such a medical case would be only sorrowfully banal if the grounds of the prognosis were not merely astrological : for the diagnosis as for the prognosis, William did without any clinical examination, and observed the sky only, the *figura celi* of which most manuscripts of *De urina non visa* give a representation. With this medical case immortalized *post*

eventum at the end of the treatise, William gave to his manifesto the evidence of a practice, and it was meant to become almost an *exemplum* of the superiority of astrology on medicine.

Why did William write such a text ? In his famous prologue, he explained that he wanted to satisfy the demand of fellow students, and despite of the lack of precisions, it informs us on the existence, in the Marseille of the beginning of the 13th century, i.e. a long time before the creation of any university in that city, of informal groups, bound by the thirst of knowledge, but maybe also lacking of texts. But what does the sentence « hanc artem studentium » refer to ? Arts ? Medicine ? Astrology ? It's likely that William means « medical astrology », a discipline of which he wanted to be the defender, by telling, at the end of his treatise, one of his own successful experiences. And the success of such an innovating practice could explain the « ignorance and envy » he mentions in the first sentence of his prologue, probably the « ignorance and envy » of jealous practitioners. His whole treatise can also be read as a « Defense et illustration » aiming to have done with the disparagement and incomprehension suffered by a medicus skilled in astrology ; and under this aspect too, there is a neat relationship between our English man settled in Marseille and Raymond of Marseille, who conceived his *Liber cursuum planetarum* as a proclamation defending astrology.

Guillelmus wanted to satisfy a group of students, and his desire was apparently fulfilled since his book appeared on the curriculum of the programme of the Faculty of Arts and medicine at Bologna in 1405. But he also said, he wanted to deliver a memorial to posterity, and the more I looked at the fortune of the text, the more I thought that his prayer was heard.

Some numbers will be more eloquent than any sentence : as I started my research on this peculiar treatise, I could lean principally on Lynn Thorndike's and Emmanuel Poulle's works on it. Thanks to the first one, 22 manuscripts were known, and the French scholar deceased last year added some copies to that amount.

After years side by side with William the Englishman, I finished my Habilitation thesis in 2008, having brought to the light some 60 mss. I decided then to make from my thesis a book and 2 other years went by : between the discussion of my thesis and the publication on the book, I detected 3 new manuscripts of *De urina non visa*, and since the day I accepted with joy Jo Edge's invitation and today, I found the description of 2 new copies...

To cut a long story short, the examination of the manuscript tradition of this short treatise reveals several aspects of its fortune which deserve to be underscored :

First, the great number and variety of manuscripts. Those numerous copies include some vernacular translations, in French, German and English (one version was recently edited by Hilary Carey), in the present state of my informations and researches, and this phenomenon tells us something else : *De urina non visa* stimulated not only the scholars, the *literati*, those who possessed latin culture, but it

excited also the lay milieux.

If we consider the quality of the owners, insofar as the manuscripts themselves say something about them, two other things are striking :

1° The success of this little text in universitary circles even faraway from Bologna.

But was it actually studied ? We must remind here that numerous dark zones roam about the history of the teaching of *quadrivium* in Europe, and reckon that the Bolognese statutes are exceptional, maybe even ideal. This text dated 1405 asserts that William's treatise was properly studied at the faculty of medicine of Bologna, during the fourth year to be more precise, and lots of scholars deduce from those statutes that *De urina non visa* was probably already studied at Cecco d'Ascoli's time.

The faculty of Bologna was a very peculiar place for its officialisation of the « wedding » between medicine and the science of the stars, *astrologia* or *astronomia*. Nevertheless, lots of evidences speak of a large interest for William's Work at a european scale : we can't assert that it was studied, but certainly copied and read by lots of scholars, including great astronomers as Pierre de Limoges, for example, and in many places : the extant manuscripts reflect the success of this text not only in Italy, but also in England or in the new universities born in Eastern Europe during the last centuries of the Middle Ages like Krakow.

2° But I was much more astounished to verify how many mendicants were William's faithfull followers.

Most certainly, *astronomia* et *astrologia* were two consubstantial faces of the *scientia stellarum*, and lots of religious are known for their works in astronomy or in astrology (according to our actual categories) : as Sophie Page has shown for London in the middle of the 15th century, astrology interested many members of religious orders. But the step towards medical astrology seems to be the result of a choice or a curiosity that we have to try to explain.

Among the extant *De urina non visa* manuscripts, for example, the actual codex Avignon 1022 belonged to the Dominicans of Avignon, and the Münchener codex 11067 was copied by Theodoricus Ruffi, lector at the franciscan convent of Grünberg / Gronenberg.

But more over, William's work seems to have particularly inspired some mendicants skilled in astrology, like the italian Dominican Nicolas de Paganica, who composed in 1330 a *Compendium medicinalis astrologiae* to satisfy a request, not of students but of teachers : he says expressly that he compiled his work to answer the pressing need of three recipients who were friars and « professores phyxice scientie », Rogerius de Manfredonia, Nucius de Asculo et Rainaldus de Adria.

The *Compendium* largely takes over William's treatise, but Nicolas underscores repeatedly his orthodoxy, even in the *explicit*, and it's possible to read those declarations as an effect of Cecco's condemnation 3 years earlier. Anyway, the interest for astrology was quite suspicious to the Church's eyes, especially the particular astrological judgements that assumed the shape of elections, nativities or interrogations. Interrogations were the most suspect activities of astrologers, for their

accountances with divination, and the *De urina non visa* precisely belongs to this genre. This fact explains that Nicolas's remake of *De urina non visa* ends with the prediction that the patient would die within 2 month and 8 days « if God wanted it », and asserts that it happened « with God's approval », « the only one able to cure the sick and wake up the dead ».

The same kind of precautionary utterings are to be found, a century later, in another treatise of medical astrology mainly inspired by William the Englishman, the *Amicus medicorum* composed in 1431 by the french franciscan Jean Ganivet on request of a doctor from Bruxelles, Henricus Amici. Nicolas de Paganica stated that he wrote for the profit and utility of doctors, and the title of Ganivet's work is quite eloquent on his intentions. Like Nicolas de Paganica, he softens many assertions of the *De urina non visa* by invoking the divine willingness, and one can wonder if Ganivet knew William's work directly or through Nicolas' Compendium ; but it does n't remove the fact that Ganivet was a franciscan, and that his medico-astrological treatise was the most successfull of the Middle Ages.

Very recently, Linda Ehram's Voigts fascinating article on Ralph Hoby introduced me to another mendicant « fan » of William the Englishman, this time in England... As a matter of fact, this franciscan from Hereford composed in 1437 a *Tractatus phisice astronomice ad magnam securitatem exercitii artis medicine* which attests numerous readings, including *De urina non visa*, and the same desire of defending medical astrology. Ralph Hoby was not a doctor at all, but a man of great erudition, and probably a « sacre theologie professor » ; nevertheless, as we can read in the explicit of his treatise, he was moved to its composition by a practical need:

« Et sic finitur tractatus parvus scilicet utilis collectus a fratre Radulpho Hoby herfordensi ordinis minorum anno gracie 1437 primo die Junii ».

In different places of Europe, a same interest leaded some religious from astronomy to medical astrology, and not only in the two principal Mendicant orders : the Austin Friars are not backward, even if they are rarely considered in this perspective. Lacking time, I will only mention Agostino da Trento, born at the end of the 13th century, who composed among other an *Epistola astrologica* addressed to his bishop as he was lector at the *studium* of Perugia. In his opinion, plague afflicted Italy because most of the doctors ignored the science of the stars (« Et accidit error iste pestiferus multis medicis propter ignorantiam astronomie ») ; and in nine chapters, he examined the nature of the symptoms, the prophylactical precautions to take, the parts of the body, the persons and the parts of the world most frequently afflicted, according to the astrological doctrine ; the treatise ended with some recommendations adresssed to the doctors of the Trento's country. Besides this *Epistola*, he composed an *Opusculum de astrologia et medicina* influenced too by *De urina non visa* and recently edited by D. Gobbi, but that I haven't been able to study yet.

But what do we know exactly about the practicing of the technique that William recommended ?

As a matter of fact, several testimonies show us that the « judgement of the urine not seen » had some concrete applications, and not only in Simon de Phares' imagination ; Nicolas Monnel, author of a french *Livre des passions astrologiques*, also

known as *Traité de l'influence des astres sur les maladies et les médecines*, refers to his own experience (« j'ay cest present livre composé et fait a mon entendement sur l'art d'astrologie, lequel mon temps a pratiqué ay este studien »), and expresses the conviction that his book can be very useful to surgeons : « Lequel est tres utile et proufitable a touts signeurs surgiens et a tout l'estat de malladie, la fin de la nature, par quelle cause et le jour et le terme que passient sera allegié ou que il garira, et quand il empira ou mora moyennant que on sache l'eure et le jour que le malladie commencha ».

Simon de Phares, in his short account on an imaginary physician called Demoras, said that he used such a treatise (« et d'iceluy ay pratiqué assez de fois »), and before him Jean Ganivet, in his *Amicus medicorum*, testifies the reality of practice by describing the medical consultation. Finally, the 16th century England offers at least two names of astrologers having put into practice the method recommended by William to propose a prognosis without any examination of the urine. The astrologer Simon Forman (1552-1611) composed his *Grounds of arte* around 1594-1595, and wrote notably : « [God] hath given me the true knowledge thereof that alle the world that heard me or sawe me have wondred at my judgements of the diseases of those that habe bene sicke, when I have neither seene them nor their urine ». And we can also mention Robert Fludd (1574-1637), who wrote, among others, a treatise called *Uromancy, That is, Divination by the Urine, in which he presented* a series of cases illustrated by horoscopes that he interpreted thanks to a « iatromathematical uromancy », of his own supposed to reveal what could not be seen in the urine, while his « physiological uromancy » was meant to show what could be seen in the fluid ».

To go back to our Friars, what about their effective practice of prognosis guided by medical astrology ? According to Angela Montford, after 1299, time of a new legislation restricting the number or religious studying medicine, most of the medical knowledge was not acquired anymore by the Mendicants with a view to practice, but in a theoretical perspective, like other sciences converging into theology.

Nevertheless, we saw that a Dominican like Nicolas de Paganica shows the medical practice in Mendicant milieux in a different light, not anymore normative but descriptive (I don't have the time to dwell on the subject, but I have to remind that he was also the inventor of a *quadrans novus*, a tool for astrological calculations which was not a method but a proper thing, since he describes it as « very beautiful to see and very easy to handle »). As for the franciscan Jean Ganivet, his work expressively aimed to guide the doctors in their practice, and to allow the *phisici astrologi* to prognosticate the outcome of illnesses. It looks so as if the fact that Willam's *De urina non visa* attracted some Mendicants invited us to reconsider the question of oblivion of the practice, although lots of things clearly remain to be found out on this theme.

Truly, none of the friars mentioned in this paper was a proper physician. Could then such an interest for medical astrology and its predictive potentialities showed by some friars be a new face of the concern for prognosis that Frederick Paxton brought to light in the monastic circles of the high Middle Ages, in connection with the concern of preparing themselves to die ? To be able to predict the day of death was also to be able to anticipate the preparations for departure, and in a way to protect themselves against a bad death.

[It might be my last word ; according to the remaining time, my kind spokesman could read the following conclusion]

They are several intriguing aspects of the posterity of the *De urina non visa* thaht would deserve to be treated, to begin with this question : how can we explain that such a text, ceaselessly copied, quoted and used till the end of the Middle Ages and beyond, was never printed ? I first imagined that it was an effect of the censure of the Church, particularly the prohibition of Simon de Phares' books by the Parisian faculty of theology in 1494 ; but at least 4 arguments fight this hypothesis :

1° The art of printing existed for almost half a century ; 2° the 1494 prohibition did not keep some other works to circulate... Jean Ganivet's *Amicus medicorum*, for instance, was printed in Lyon as early as 1496 ! ; 3° at least 2 manuscripts testify that William's treatise was still copied in the XVIth century, that is araised still some interest ; 4° and, after all, there has been a *De urina non visa* printed in the Renaissance, which confirms that the theme was not totally old fashioned and still had an audience but it's not William's treatise, but anonymous writing by the Flemish humanist Joachim Sterck van Ringelbergh (1499-1556)...

The reason why William's *De urina non visa* has to be tracked down elsewhere... But it's time to stop talking, to thank you a lot for your attention and in advance for your suggestions, and to thank my spokesman warmly ...

